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20 January 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Probable Communist Reaction to Release of POW's

1. Over the past week, the Communists have issued warnings that they would regard the return of the 22,000 POW's to the UNC and their subsequent release as illegal under the armistice terms and as "gravely threatening the peace in Korea".

a. At a recent UNCMAC meeting, the Communist representative told the UN representatives that:

"In order to insure the implementation of the terms of reference and prevent the armistice agreement from being further disrupted, thereby gravely threatening the peace in Korea, I put forth today a proposal which is of great significance and ask that your side should immediately put an end to all the treacherous activities for abducting the POW's. If your side persists in going your own way and gives no consideration to this serious proposal of our side, your side must bear the full responsibility for all the grave consequences..."

b. On 13 January, Indian officials told the British that the Chinese Communist reaction to the planned release of the prisoners continued to be very strong and that the Communists had told the Indians they could not "stand idly by" while the POW's were being returned to the UN.

2. It is our estimate, however, that these warnings do not indicate a Communist intent to resume hostilities in Korea, or to launch new aggression elsewhere in Asia. In our opinion, the Communists do not regard the disposition of the POW's as a matter sufficiently important to justify breaking the status quo in Korea. This was demonstrated by their acceptance of the armistice provisions for voluntary repatriation. It was also demonstrated by their de facto acceptance of the ROK release of 27,000 prisoners in mid-June prior to signing the armistice. On both occasions, the Communists protested at length and attempted to conceal their loss of position. They did not, however, permit the POW issue to prevent the negotiation and signing of the armistice agreement.

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3. We believe that the withdrawal of major Chinese Communist forces from Korea, the announcement of long-range Communist plans for rehabilitating North Korea, and present Soviet and Chinese Communist emphasis upon domestic programs are evidence of a Communist decision not to resume hostilities in Korea. Recent Communist tactics concerning the POW's appear to have been designed largely to exert pressure on the Indians and to conceal the prestige losses the Communists suffered on the POW issue.

4. The Communists made no efforts on 20 and 21 January to prevent the transfer of the 22,000 prisoners from custody of the Indian forces to the UNK. However, it is still possible that disturbances will be instigated by Communist agents among anti-Communist prisoners. The purpose of such disturbances would be to give substance to the Communist contention that pro-Communist prisoners have been forcibly retained. The Communists will probably also continue to refuse to accept the 349 pro-Communist prisoners in order to dramatize their contention that the POW's have been illegally released.

5. Release of the prisoners to civilian status by the UN command will be denounced by the Communists as a violation of the armistice agreement and will continue to be the subject of extensive propaganda. The Communists might use this "violation" as a justification for actions on their own part violating the armistice agreement, such as a strengthening of their military position in North Korea. They might also use it as an excuse for refusing a demand for the return of UN nationals whom they still hold. For the reasons stated in paragraph 2, however, we believe that the Communists will consider the release of prisoners, taken by itself, as a development requiring a major alteration of their previously determined policy in Korea or elsewhere in the Far East. We therefore believe that the release of the prisoners will not cause the Communists to attack Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, or Burma, or to change the scale and nature of their aid to the Viet Minh in Indochina.

6. We believe that the Communist outcry concerning the UN armistice "violation" may have been intended not only to obscure their defeat on the POW issue but to bolster the Communist bargaining position prior to the Berlin conference and an anticipated special UN session. By presenting the view that the POW release was illegal, that the Korean armistice has thereby been violated, and that a tense situation consequently has been created in the Far East, the Communists may be seeking to convince Asian and Western European governments that only a Five Power Conference can now lessen tensions in Asia.

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